Standardized formatting of written work is required to provide a common context in which to present ideas. Students, as well as formal researchers present their ideas or findings in this common context or format. The readers of said works can then evaluate the information without the distraction of an unfamiliar or unconventional presentation style.

Language Arts and some Humanities courses often require the Modern Language Association format, usually referred to by the acronym MLA. Research in the Sciences typically requires APA (American Psychological Association) format. Differences between these formats will be explained below. Other writing formats are Chicago/Turabian, Harvard, Columbia Guide to Online Style (CGOS) and Council of Biology Editors (CBE).

Students can expect to be required to complete a research paper of some length using one of these formats. The more familiar students are with formatting protocol and structure, the less of an obstacle this requirement will be to successful completion of their project.

Unfortunately for students, a standardized format is not what it seems. While it is expected that there will be differences between two types of formats such as APA and MLA, there are also variations within a given format. MLA is now on the 3rd Edition of its Handbook for Writer’s and the 7th Edition of its Style Guide for Scholarly Research. APA published the 6th Edition of its APA Manual in 2009. Different instructors may be comfortable with an earlier version of a format and use that standard in the expectations of their students. An individual instructor may also “tweak” the standardized form to suit his or her inclinations. All this makes it very confusing to students. **The bottom line is this; recognize that different formats and variations of each of those formats exist. Determine the specific format the instructor requires, then, follow that format.** Do not expect the instructor to recognize the format with which you are most familiar. You must adjust to the instructor’s expectations and requirements…you must follow the instructor’s format.

Basic Rules of Formatting

#1 – Ask the instructor what format he or she requires. Also, what version of that format, or what reference source of that format, should be used? Some will not care, nor be specific. In this case, use one source for your format guide and keep it handy in case your paper is marked differently. For the instructors who pay attention to format, using their recommended source for formatting is essential. Online resource < http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/ >

#2 – Formatting is simply following directions – once you have the format, follow it page by page, step by step, instruction by instruction, sample by sample, punctuation mark by punctuation mark.

#3 – Realize you may need to change some of the default settings on your computer’s word processing program. Many have a MLA or APA setting or automatically set spacing and margins. These may not give you the exact format you need. You MUST change the settings to match the instructor’s format. It would be helpful to realize this BEFORE you begin, in order to save some time. (i.e. remove extra space after paragraph)

# 4 – Online formatting sites and the “formatted” examples on the Internet are helpful, but the format may NOT exactly match what is required by the instructor’s format. Use the sample, but be sure to “tweak” it to match your required format exactly.

# 5 - Be sure to review your entire finished product to be sure the instructor’s format has been consistently applied. Adding sentences, deleting punctuation or other editing may have changed fonts, spacing or altered page breaks. Take a pause from working and look at it the next day with “fresh eyes” or have someone else proof for you (but, they must understand what they are looking for in order to actually help you).

**COMMON GROUND** of APA and MLA

⁭ **a one inch margin** at the top, bottom, left and right (left margin justified, right margin unjustified)

⁭ **double spaced (lines) throughout**, including headings, indented quotes, Works Cited or Reference page

⁭ typically, all **12 pt standard font** (Times New Roman, Arial, Calibri); BLACK ink

⁭ **a header**, within the top right margin, with page number (difference in content of header discussed below)

⁭ a means of identifying the content, author, context and date of the paper. APA, MLA, and often course instructors, require the presentation of this information in different set-ups or styles. (The differences in how to present this content for APA and MLA are discussed below, or better yet, confirm with the instructor)

⁭ usually **single spacing (character) after punctuation** at the end of each sentence

⁭ the use of **in-text citations** to properly credit the words and/or ideas of others (APA / MLA differences below)

⁭ punctuation mark comes after parenthesis of in-text citation (Smith 1902).

⁭ the last page(s) devoted to giving **sources of information**:

⁭ Bibliography (all sources read),

⁭ Works Cited (only sources from which ideas were used), or

⁭ Reference page (APA version of Works Cited)

**GENERAL DIFFERENCES** of APA and MLA

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | M L A | A P A |
| Page header | None on page 1 –starts on page 2.  Author, Context, Date, Content (Title) usually on page 1–L justified, dbl spcd | Cover page is page 1 & has header |
| Page header in top R margin (R justifd)  Five (5) spaces btwn content & pg # | Author last name page | Shortened title page |
| Cover page? | Usually not required – see above | Yes |
| Content (Title of Paper) | NOT at TOP – comes after Date  \*go to Author of paper 1st,Context, Date  P 1, dbl spd after Date, horiz centered  Dbl sp to body of paper | Cvr. Pg, centered vert. & horiz |
| Author of paper | \*P 1, first last name, top L of paper | Cvr. Pg, dbl sp below Title, centered |
| Context (course/instructor) | \*P 1, Dr. Mr. Ms. Mrs. Last name, L margin, dbl spaced below author | Cvr. Pg, Dr. Mr. Ms. Mrs. Last name, dbl spd below Author, centered |
| Date | P 1, 12 December 2009, L margin, dbl spd below Context  \*after date – go to Content (Title) | Cvr pg, dbl spd, below Context, cntrd  December 12, 2009 |
| In-Text Citation “emphasis” | Source & source location (page #)  (Smith 22)  Often uses source author in sentence text: Smith stated …. (22). | Source & date (currency of info)  (Smith 2009) |
| Citation signal phrase | See example above | Always uses past tense. |
| Writing numbers – Numerals are generally acceptable for dates, addresses, %, fractions, statistics, money & time in both formats. Do not start any sentence with numerals. | Other numbers from 1 – 11 written as numerals, all larger numbers written as words. | Other numbers that can be written with two words or less are written out. Numbers requiring three words or more are written as numerals. |